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ABSTRACT

Films can be used at any level of language proficiency to teach or afford practice in a variety of language skills. At lower and intermediate levels, a film could serve as the tool for teaching vocabulary, grammar, speaking skills and composition. The lesson would proceed in several stages. Prior to the showing, the students would become familiar with the story-line, that is a simplified version of the script in short sentences. After the first viewing for enjoyment, the students would practice and discuss them and use the new vocabulary. Further use of the film would depend on the skill the teacher might wish to develop. For speaking practice, the film might be shown a second time without sound to allow for narration or discussion by small groups. A question on the film could introduce a free composition lesson. At intermediate levels, information, how-to-do-it type films can be useful. Students with greater language proficiency can use the same types of exercises but with greater emphasis on vocabulary building and with longer and more complex films. Whatever the activity, students should have the satisfaction of expressing their thoughts and feelings and the desire to increase language proficiency. (AMH)

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FILMS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

by

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Why use film to teach English as a second language? The most obvious factor is that as a medium it is essentially different from the ones usually used. A film may or may not have a verbalized sound track, but in any case, the message is received not by the ear but dominantly by the eye of the beholder. And while many ESL teachers use visual stimuli in their teaching, film, which is in motion, is basically different from static picutures or other graphic illustrations. We know this both from intuitive judgment and because Marshall McLuhan (1964) make us all aware of it more than a decade ago.

Film affords variety in the ESL classroom too. On some days this reason alone could be strong enough to recommend using it. And no matter what the day or the weather, the prospect of, "...movie today, teacher?" is always greeted with interest by the students.

Besides employing a different medium and affording a change in classroom routine, the best reason I know of for using film is its versatility. It can be used at any level of language proficiency and to teach or exercise a variety of language skills. Morely and Lawrence offer the opinion that, "Films, a vital communication medium of the twentieth century has been virtually untouched by TESL as a content tool (and) can be an almost limitless source of material for in class language practice." (1971a, p.118) They go on to report(1971a, 1971b) on the development of a program using film for TESL--

to improve aural comprehension, speaking, writing and reading. Their very complete program is, they state, designed for advanced and high-intermediate ESL students. In contrast, the suggestions presented here are intended for use with low and low-intermediate proficiency students.

At Lower Levels

At levels one and two (in a six-level scheme) use of a film might proceed in somewhat the following manner: On the day preceding the film viewing each student would receive a printed copy of the film's "story line," i.e. a list of simple present tense sentences describing the action of the film. If time permits the teacher may read sentences of the story line. In any case, students are assigned to be familiar with all sentences and new vocabulary words by showtime the following class period. In the next class the students are told to simply watch and enjoy the film. Then after the showing the story line sheets should be brought out and all sentences repeated by the class and discussed. Previously unclear vocabulary items will, for the most part, have been defined by the film itself. The students, by this time, are thoroughly familiar with the film and from this point use of the material can depend upon what sort of skill the teacher decides needs exercising. For example: for speaking exercise the film could be shown a second time with the volume turned off to allow for narration either by individual students, by groups or by the entire class; for composition or speaking exercise the students could be asked to respond to the question, "Which character was best/

better and why?" either in writing or verbally; for grammar exercise could change tense of the verbs in the story line, or number of the verbs, or transform into questions, etc.

Another variation to using a printed script is to show the film with no preparation at all, then have the class generate first a vocabulary, (A running list of words is compiled on chalkboard or overhead projection) then story lines are composed either by the group or individually. Less thorough coverage of the film usually results from this method but that is often balanced by a more uniform and animated participation from the class.

At Intermediate Levels

When using films without verbalized sound track at the intermediate levels somewhat the same procedure can be employed as at the lower levels, but with less empahsis on vocabulary definitions and more emphasis on discussion or composition regarding the meaning and implications of the film. In fact, to insure a spontaneous discussion it is well to show the film as sort of special event with no preparation beyond perhaps a mention that there will be a film during the next class period. The students can be told to sit and enjoy the film, that they will have a chance to talk or write about it afterward and to merely keep two questions in mind as they watch: "What happened?" "Why did it happen?" After the film is shown the class breaks down into small discussion groups of no more than five students each. They discuss for at least ten to fifteen minutes their answers to the two questions. These small group discussions are ended by a sharing with the entire class what has been discussed in each small group. To exercise writing instead of

speaking skills the same period of time allotted to discussion could instead be devoted to a free forced individual composition. Ideally each student will have practiced his/her ability to express ideas and feelings in English, certainly each will have exercised listening skills. Only after the film and discussion or composition might the prepared story line be given to the students as an aid in "filling in the blanks" they might have overlooked and to possibly add a few new vocabulary items.

Besides the "think and discussion piece films, information films can be used for intermediate levels. For example, a simple, short film describing emergency first aid procedures can be easy to comprehend and provide useful information at the same time. For this sort of film a verbatim script really needs to be in the hands of the students before the film showing. (If your film does not come with script, one can be generated by simply audiotaping the soundtrack during the next screening, they typing up a script from the audiotaped recording.) A list of new vocabulary words is also an aid. After showing the film discussion of the material is in order. Content questions then can be posed either during discussion or as a quiz.

At Upper Levels

Students with more language proficiency can be exercised by using films in essentially the same methods as described for the intermediate levels. However, greater emphasis can be placed on vocabulary building by using longer and more complex films and following them by greater demands on the student to tax his/her developing abilities with the language, e.g. Leo Beuermann

is an award-winning film, beautifully done, with challenging vocabulary which raises the issue of any society's treatment of its handicapped members.

Whatever activities are used to channel the student's reaction to a film he/she should have the satisfaction of being to some degree able to express thoughts and feelings. At the same time there should be generated a desire to increase language proficiency to better express that which cannot be said due to limited language capabilities.

Conclusion

The preceding provides an outline with basic suggestions of how and for what purposes films can be used in the ESL classroom. Films are a suppliment to language learning activities which all too easily can become exclusively reliant on the printed word as a medium. Using films is consistent with what seems the goal of all ESL classroom activity--helping students to use English as both receivers and producers via both written and verbal media.

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